



At one time or another, we've all been on a field trip. In elementary school, these excursions were almost always a welcome change of scenery. We'd hop on the bus with our brown bag lunches in hand and head off to the Planetarium, or to the Tidepools, or to see a play. I don't think we cared all that much where we went, it was just the opportunity to escape the four walls of the classroom for a day that excited us the most.

In Revelation 4 the Apostle John takes a field trip of his own. He's been exiled not in a classroom but on an island. He's already had a vision of Christ, who spoke to him and told him to write what he saw. John took dictation as Jesus told him what to write to seven different churches of Asia Minor. But the letters are done and John says, "*After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard, like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me, said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things'*" (v.1). John is invited by the Lord Jesus himself to go on a field trip; a field trip where he'll see what "*must take place after these things.*" In other words, John will see something of what will happen in the future; not what **might** take place but what **must** take place. All these events were in John's future; some of these events may still be future to us.

One thing we know for sure is the first stop on this field trip was heaven. The open door John saw was a door to heaven, and the trumpet-like invitation was, "Come **up** here..." And so John, not physically, but in a Holy Spirit-sent visionary experience, entered into the reality of heaven. If you were to take such field trip, what do you think you would see? Depending on your taste in movies, would you see George Burns or Morgan Freeman? Would you see plump little winged angels with oversized harps? Would you be greeted by a long lost loved one? If your experience was anything like John's you wouldn't immediately see any of these things. Instead, you'd see a throne. At the center of John's vision is a throne. The first thing he reports, "*Behold, a throne standing in heaven.*" That throne is mentioned 11 times in this short chapter.

Remember, the churches of Asia were small and struggling. The might of Rome and its emperor seemed invincible. What could a few defenseless Christ followers do if an imperial edict banished them from the face of the earth? Already the powers of darkness were closing in on them. The emperor Domitian, who sat on a throne of his own, demanded they worship him. But in

this vision of heaven John sees things as they really are, not as they appear to be. It's like God is saying, "You need not fear. At the center of the universe stands a throne. From it the spinning planets receive their orders; the gigantic galaxies give their allegiance; and the tiniest organism finds its life." John uses several words that point to the centrality of the throne.

John's vision of a throne

On the throne

First, he speaks of the One sitting on the throne. This, of course, is God. He's the One who rules, not random chance, not good luck, not Domitian, but God. He sits. He's in control. He's the judge of all the earth. He can't be described except to say he's like "*a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance.*" These are translucent stones. The jasper was crystal clear, refracting many different colors. Many identify it as a diamond. All the shining and flashing facets of the glory of God are compared to a brilliant diamond. The Sardias is also known as a carnelian, a fiery, blood red ruby. Some would say it symbolizes God's blazing wrath soon to be poured out on his enemies.

Around the throne

Moving away from a description of the One on the throne, John tells what he saw around the throne. He says first "*there was a rainbow around the throne, like an emerald in appearance.*" Light and a myriad of colors surround the throne, with emerald green being dominant. The rainbow reminds us of God's promises—his mercy and his grace. After the flood God gave the rainbow as a sign he'd never again destroy the earth with water (Gen. 9:13-17).

But that's not all that's around the throne. He also saw 24 elders on 24 thrones of their own. They're clothed in white garments with a golden crown on their heads. The identity of the 24 elders is a hotly debated subject. Some say they represent the raptured church and from this point on in Revelation the church is in heaven, having been removed so it won't have to experience the tribulation described in chapters 6-19. But nothing is explicitly said here about a rapture having taken place. Others say they combine 12 tribal heads of Israel and the 12 apostles of Christ to represent the people of God throughout history. There is a lot you can say to support these views, but my own view is these are a ruling class of heavenly beings or angels. Let me tell you why I believe that. Although angels are never called

elders anywhere else in the Bible, in the rest of Revelation we see these same 24 elders doing things more suited to angels than humans. In chapter 5 they offer bowls of incense which are said to be the prayers of the saints. That same function is performed by an angel in chapter 8. In chapter 5 when they sing with the four living creatures they don't sing as those who have been redeemed, but **about** those who have been redeemed. White garments and golden crowns can be worn by angels or humans. We know angels have a ruling status because in Col. 1:18 Paul refers to certain ranks of angels as thrones, principalities and rulers. They may even have some sort of priestly function because there were 24 priestly orders in the Old Testament. So that's my view. But whether these are angels or somehow representative of believers in heaven, I don't think our focus should be on the identity on the 24 elders; it should be on the throne.

From the throne

In v.5 we see that out from the throne come flashes of lightning and peals of thunder. These remind us of how God revealed himself on Mt. Sinai and point to his frightening awesomeness and power. This is not a God to play games with.

Before the throne

Then we see that before the throne there were two things. First, there were seven lamps of fire which he says are the seven spirits of God. This describes the Holy Spirit in all his fullness. Torches like this were often symbolic of war and this prepares us for the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit fueled wrath in the rest of the book. Also, before the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal. This points to God's awesome vastness and his holiness that separates him from the rest of his creation.

In the center and around the throne

Then John tells us what he saw in the center and around the throne. He saw four living creatures who will play a major role in this book. They're stationed in the inner circle nearest the throne. There is no question these beings are an exalted order of angels called cherubim. Ezekiel describes the same creatures in Ez. 1 and identifies them as cherubim. They each have six wings and they're full of eyes behind and before. Their many eyes represent their awareness, alertness and knowledge. Their wings show they're constantly in motion in service and worship. In order they resemble a lion, a calf, a man and a flying eagle. Together they represent every aspect of nature: wild beasts, domesticated animals, human beings and flying creatures. So they reveal the praise and adoration extended to God by the totality of his creation.

Toward the throne

Finally, this scene in heaven ends in worship directed toward God on his throne. Here and in chapter 5 there are five great hymns of praise, each increasing in the numbers of singers. It starts with

the four living creatures singing as a quartet. They sing of the holiness and power of God, as well as his eternal nature. And then the 24 elders fall down before him, cast their crowns before the throne and sing a song of their own. They proclaim him as worthy to receive glory and honor and power because he created all things. Later, in chapter 5 myriads of angels add their voices and finally all created beings in the universe sing a chorus of praise.

In all of this there is something going on here you might miss without some knowledge of the culture. In the political Roman culture of that day, it was common for petitioners to fall down and prostrate themselves before the King. Lesser kings would even lay their crowns before the emperor to show their submission to them. The words we hear in v.11 ("Worthy are you...") are the very same words that would be accorded to the emperor as he entered a city. Anybody in that day understood what this vision meant. One day even the Roman emperor will lay his crown down before the King of Kings. The emperor isn't to be feared, God is. God rules! God is worthy. He's the only One who is eternal. He's the Almighty God. He's holy. He's the creator. You see, once again, John is showing us things as they really are, not as they appear to be. Imagine if we could live from that reality rather than what we see here on earth.

John's vision of a throne teaches us how to worship

And, honestly, that's what worship allows us to do. This is a scene of worship. In this world our perspective gets all distorted. But in worship we get reoriented to how things really are. The curtain is pulled back and we see a throne and we see One on the throne who is glorious and beautiful and powerful and holy. Notice a few things about worship here in chapter 4.

Worship is centered on God

First, the most obvious thing is worship is centered on God. Throughout the week we lose our focus, other things compete for our attention, other people and other things clamor for us to acclaim them worthy, and so we become fragmented. But worship should reorient us. It centers us again upon God. He's holy. He's the only one who always was and is and is to come. He's the Almighty. He's the creator and sustainer of all things. He rules. He sits on his throne. He's worthy. Our songs and our prayers should center on God, not on me. In worship we center on God.

Worship is ongoing

We also see here worship is ongoing. It's ceaseless. One night I was watching a special on Motown and Diana Ross came on the stage and proclaimed, *Motown is forever*, which was her way of giving ultimate value to Motown music. But Motown isn't forever; the only work of man that's forever is worship. This means worship has inestimable value as something we do. It's one of the few things we do on earth we can be sure we'll do in heaven. When we worship God we're tuning our instruments for the

symphony of heaven; we're introducing a bit of eternity into time. So when we begin to worship on Sunday morning we're joining in on worship that was already in progress in heaven. It doesn't start at 9:00 am; it's the one work of creation that's always going on. Have you ever entered this auditorium while worship was in progress? In a way, that's what we do when we worship. We enter into something already in progress.

Worship is active

The third observation about worship is it's active; it's a verb. Worship is an action we **do** more so than a state of being we enter into. Notice the actions of worship in this passage: speaking God's praise, falling on their faces before the throne, casting their crowns before him. It's no surprise the Hebrew and Greek words for worship focus on action. One of the words for worship used right here in this passage means literally "to bow down" or prostrate oneself. Another word from which we get our word *liturgy*, literally means "service" or "work." In biblical worship we're active, not passive. We're doing something for God more so than receiving something from God. Are you an active participant in worship? Do you come on Sundays to do the work of worship? Worship isn't passive, it's participative. Worship isn't a mood, it's a response. Worship isn't just a feeling, it's a declaration. One thing that can be said about the Catholic Church is worship isn't passive. Going to Mass as a kid was like the old football cheer "lean to the left, lean to the right, stand up, sit down, fight, fight, fight." We'd go home exhausted! I'm not advocating a return to that style of worship, but when we come to church, lean back in our chair for an hour and never participate, something's wrong.

Worship is communal

Fourth, worship is communal. All the different groups who gather around the throne aren't a bunch of individuals, each doing their own thing. They're a community, the servants of God gathered to worship their master. Together they sing. Together the 24 elders fall down and cast their crowns before him. This isn't a time for us to express our individuality. We worship together as part of God's family. Too many of our songs are written in the first person singular, not the first person plural. This doesn't mean we all have to sing exactly the same thing. In Revelation 4 and 5 the worship is antiphonal. The cherubim sing, then the elders, then the angels, then all creation. This is why we need choirs and worship teams. They can sing something that stirs the rest of us to add our own voice to the worship. The end result should be that all of the saints gathered below join all of those gathered above in adding their voices to those of the cherubim, elders and angels gathered around the throne. Together we sing, "He is worthy."

Worship is overwhelming

Finally, worship is overwhelming. You have this sense here that it takes our breath away. It's like the difference between seeing a

photo of Yosemite and actually going there. You can see a photo and really appreciate the beauty of the place. But when you go in person and you see through the multitude of colors in that valley into the awesome power of Half Dome and all the rest, it takes your breath away. Worship should do that to us every once in a while. It should overwhelm us. We should fall down. We should cast our crowns before him, seeing all of our accomplishments and all of the things on earth that tend to impress us as nothing compared to him.

In worship we see things as they really are, not as they appear to be

In worship we see things as they really are, not as they appear to be. We're constantly bombarded by the so-called reality of today. TV, radio, newspapers, advertisers—all battle to focus our minds on the here and now. Our culture teaches us that to be happy we need money, success, power, and comfort. Like mindless minions, we follow these dictates. We work. We earn. We spend. We borrow. We indebt ourselves into buying things that never have and never will make us happy. All the while, we feel empty on the inside.

Believers can be taken in by the present reality. We see the spiritual and moral foundations of our society being shaken. We see almost every form of the total depravity of man played out for us hourly on our TV. We see churches in decline. We see Christian homes and families torn apart. We see our children killing each other and themselves. We wonder, *Where is God in all this?*

This present reality is painful. Some of us come here with a heavy load of grief. Some are struggling with their health. Some are out of work. Some face heart-wrenching emotional pain. If you were honest with yourself, you might say, *I just don't feel like worshipping God today.* I've got good news! Here's the key principle that comes from John's vision of eternal worship. It can change you as much as it changed him: In worship, we see things as they really are, not as they appear to be.

In the world we see the foundations crumbling and chaos coming; in worship we see God in sovereignty on his throne. In the world we see a great need for more stuff; in worship we see that God is all we need. He satisfies. In the world we see despair, pain, and sorrow; in worship we see hope and remember it won't always be this way. This present reality is passing. The eternal reality we glimpse in Revelation 4 is sure.

So we have to choose what reality we'll live in: temporary or eternal, material or spiritual? Are we living in light of today or eternity? Rom 12:2 says, "**Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...**" That's what worship does. It renews us. It centers us on what is real. In worship, we see things as they really are, not as they appear to be.

© 2009 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1342-3

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, October 25, 2009 at Central Peninsula Church
1005 Shell Boulevard | Foster City CA 94404 | 650 349.1132 | www.cpcfc.org. Additional copies available on request.